

Iran's spy paranoia: one example of a society the West can't quite figure out

The writer was recently in Iran on assignment.

By Claude van England

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Throughout its history, Iranian society has always been very closed.

But since the 1979 Islamic revolution, Iranians have become more inward looking than ever, according to foreigners living in Tehran.

Iran's diplomatic isolation by the international community, these foreigners add, has helped reinforce this trend.

Walking in Tehran's streets these days is an unsettling experience. People there live and think in a way that is often beyond Western logic. Westerners are sometimes struck by what, to them, is the often-contradictory reasoning of Iranians.

For instance, both detractors and supporters of Iran's Islamic regime seem gripped by what can best be described as a spy paranoia. Royalists still claim the toppling of the Shah and the coming to power of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini were the result of a conspiracy hatched by the British intelligence service and the US Central Intelligence Agency. Recent arms sales by Washington to the Islamic regime have reinforced this opinion.

Many supporters of the regime, for their part, suspect all foreigners of being intelligence agents.

Westerners with long experience in Iran say the country's strategic importance has made it a prime target for Eastern and Western intelligence services throughout this century. In addition, they say, Iranians themselves display an innate fondness for secret dealings and covert activities.

The distrust toward foreigners has grown in recent years: Many Iranians feel they stand alone against the rest of the world, which they accuse of supporting Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

A European diplomat who regularly travels to Tehran says he believes the international disapproval of the 1979 seizure of the US Embassy in Tehran led most countries to ignore Iranian requests that Iraq be formally designated as the aggressor in starting the Persian Gulf war in 1980.

"Between 1980 and 1982 the United Nations

Security Council failed to condemn the occupation by Iraq of parts of Iranian territory," the diplomat says. "The council passed its first resolution calling for a withdrawal of both armies . . . only after it was clear the Iraqis had lost the initiative. This was interpreted by the Iranians as a denial of justice . . ."

Though they share his views, many of this diplomat's Tehran-based colleagues say things have now reached a point where Iranians have buried themselves in intransigent rhetoric and are convinced they will succeed in ousting Iraqi President Hussein by military force.

Despite the anti-Western sentiments, this correspondent has never felt threatened on frequent walks through Tehran's populous and poor southern neighborhoods - even though people were aware that I worked for an American newspaper.

People appear eager to convince the foreigner of the righteousness of their country's cause. "We believe that Islam provides a good model of government for all countries," said one Iranian at a demonstration in support of "exporting" the revolution.



Khomeini: backers and foes blame it all on CIA

Diplomats in Tehran react differently to Iranian perceptions. A chargé d'affaires says that he has, for now at least, abandoned all hope of establishing a dialogue with Iran's rulers. "They are intolerant and have lost all sense of compromise," he says.

But a European ambassador suggests a different approach. "What we're witnessing here is the development of a deep and lasting resentment toward the Western world in general

and the US in particular," he says. "On the other hand, Iranian militancy is perceived as a major threat by Western populations. But it's important to keep on talking to avoid any further escalation in the hatred."

On several occasions, this writer has experienced how Iranian perceptions of today's world vary from Western ones. During a discussion with the editors of one of Iran's major dailies, our first exchange focused on the definition of terrorism. After explaining how Americans were shocked by the kidnappings of their fellow citizens in Beirut, I asked why Iranian leaders had not prevented such acts being carried out by their Lebanese allies.

One journalist answered bluntly. "In December last year, US media confirmed what we have known for months - that the CIA passes satellite pictures of Iran to the Iraqi Air Force," he said. "Those pictures are used by the Iraqis to bombard our economic installations and our cities killing hundreds of innocent civilians."

"In such a context," he asked, "how can we prevent groups within our country from considering it normal for [Lebanese] militants to kidnap US citizens?"

The journalist was echoing a theme regularly voiced by Hashemi Rafsanjani, the influential speaker of Iran's parliament. At a Jan. 28 press conference, Mr. Rafsanja-

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ni insisted Iran is not directly involved in kidnappings in Lebanon, but said: "The roots of terrorism are in the Western world - where governments shelter terrorist groups which carry attempts against our people."

This was interpreted as a reference to the People's Mojahedin, an Iranian exile opposition movement which regularly claims responsibility for killings of the Islamic Republic's officials and supporters in Iran.

The Iranians were asked why they had not turned their anger at the Soviet Union, which is Iraq's major arms supplier. Their answer: Unlike Washington, Moscow is not bent on destroying Iran's Islamic revolution. They also say that Moscow initially disapproved of Iraq's invasion of Iran in 1980.

When told that Western attitudes toward the war might have been different if some 50 US diplomats had not been held hostage in Tehran for 13 months after the Islamic revolution, the Iranians answer: "Those were spies." They accuse the US press of systematically ignoring evidence of this produced by Tehran.